

Greek Philosophers and the Rule of Law

Nearly 2,400 years ago, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle explored political philosophy. Aristotle concluded that “it is evident that the form of government is best in which every man, whoever he is, can act best and live happily.”

In Philadelphia some 2,000 years after Plato and Aristotle’s time, a group of men was trying to write a constitution. George Washington, James Madison, and the other framers of the US Constitution were dedicated to constructing a just government. Americans had overthrown what they considered a oppressive and controlling British government. The framers wanted to create a national government free of tyranny (oppression or cruelty), governed by the rule of law.

The new American nation was quite different from the ancient Greek city-states. Still, many of the framers at Philadelphia had studied and understood Plato’s and Aristotle’s political philosophies. And they were grappling with many of the same political questions.

Tyranny and the Rule of Law

Plato and Aristotle both developed important ideas about government and politics. Two of the many political subjects that these men wrote about were tyranny and the rule of law. Tyranny occurs when absolute power is granted to a ruler. In a tyrannical government, the ruler becomes corrupt and uses his power to further his own interests instead of working for the common good.

The rule of law is the principle that no one is exempt from the law, even those who are in a position of power. The rule of law can serve as a safeguard against tyranny, because just laws ensure that rulers do not become corrupt.

Athenian Democracy

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle lived in the Greek city-state of Athens. In Athenian democracy, all male citizens directly participated in making laws and deciding jury trials. Yearly elections decided who would fill important government positions. Citizens drew lots to see who would staff the remaining posts.

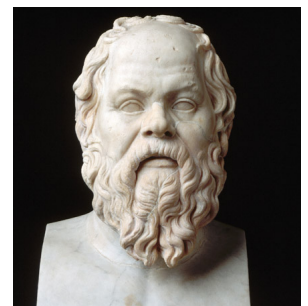
Athens had reached its height in political power before Plato was born. Its decline began with a long war with Sparta, a rival city-state. The war ended in 404 BCE with Athens’ defeat. Athens regained its democracy, but shortly after Plato’s death, the city-state fell under the control of Macedon, a kingdom north of Greece. The city remained, however, a cultural center.

Socrates (c. 469-399 BCE) and Plato (c. 428–347 BCE)

Plato was a student of Socrates. Socrates taught by asking questions about a subject and getting his students to think critically about it. Today, this is known as the Socratic method, used by many teachers and professors.

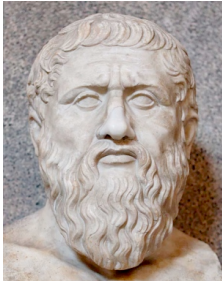
Socrates’ questioning often led to criticism of Athenian democracy and its politicians. He angered many people by his method of questioning since his questions often showed that people were not as wise as they claimed to be. An increasing number of Athenians viewed Socrates as a threat to their city-state. A few years after losing the war with Sparta, Athens put the 70-year-old Socrates on trial for not respecting the gods of Athens and for corrupting the young. Socrates denied the accusations, but he was found guilty and sentenced to death by poisoning (probably hemlock) by a jury of his fellow citizens. Socrates gave a speech at his trial in response to the accusations made against him in which he defended living an examined life. His parting comments to his judges were simple, as recorded in Plato’s *Apology*: “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.”

When Socrates died, Plato concluded that democracy was a corrupt and unjust form of government. He left Athens for a decade. Returning in 387 BCE, he established a school of higher learning called the Academy.



Socrates
Image: Araldo de Luca/Corbis

Plato's Republic



Plato
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Plato's most important work on politics is his *Republic*, published around 380 BCE. Written as a dialogue among characters, the book describes a small group of Athenians discussing political philosophy. The main character is Socrates, who voiced Plato's ideas. (Socrates never wrote down his ideas.) *The Republic* examines the meaning of justice, looks at different types of government, and outlines the ideal state. It touches on many subjects, including law and tyranny.

Plato looked at existing forms of government and found them unstable. He thought that in an **oligarchy**, the rule of a few (the rich), leads to

a city of the rich and a city of the poor, dwelling together, and always plotting against one another. . . .

The poor will overthrow the oligarchy and set up a **democracy**, the rule of the people. Plato thought that democratic "life has neither law nor order." He thought the rule of many people leads to disorder, because the citizens only want liberty and will disregard laws and authority.

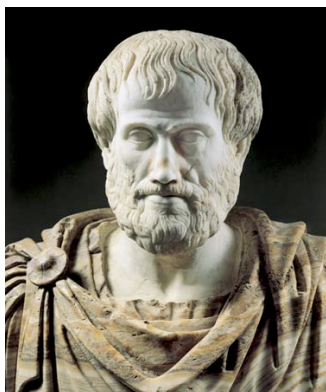
Plato deemed **tyranny** the "worst disorder of a state." Tyrants lack reason and the tyrannical state lacks reason and order. In a tyranny, no outside governing power controls the tyrant's selfish behavior.

Plato's ideal and just state is an **aristocracy**, the rule of the best. He believed leaders needed to be wise and trained in how to run a state, just as captains of ships are trained in how to run a ship. He divided his ideal state into three classes. The lowest and largest class is the producers: the farmers, craftsmen, traders, and others involved in commerce. The next class is the warriors, those who defend the state. They are educated in sports, combat, and philosophy. From the best of warrior class, the ruling class is drawn. Its members will study philosophy and be given government and military positions until age 50, when the best of them become philosopher kings.

Plato believed the lower class should own all the land and control all the wealth. The warrior class should live by a code of honor. The ruling class should use reason and live to gain wisdom. Plato believed the warrior class and the ruling class should not gain wealth or produce family dynasties.

Class	Comprised of...	Interest	Education	Property
Lower	farmers, craftsmen, merchants	pleasure	no	yes
Warrior	soldiers & police	honor & glory	yes	no
Ruling	philosophers	reason, wisdom	yes	no

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)



Aristotle
Dagli Orti/ DeA Picture Library

Born in the north of Greece, Aristotle came from a family linked to the kingdom of Macedon. When Aristotle grew up, he studied philosophy at Plato's Academy for 20 years, leaving when Plato died. He traveled and then tutored the king of Macedon's 13-year-old son, Alexander (the future Alexander the Great).

When Alexander became king of Macedon in 335 BCE, Aristotle returned to Athens to set up his own school, called the Lyceum. He studied, catalogued, lectured, debated, and wrote about every area of human knowledge.

Although Plato had been his teacher, Aristotle disagreed with much of Plato's philosophy. Plato was an idealist, who believed that everything had an ideal form. Aristotle believed in looking at the real world and studying it.

Aristotle was more interested in science than Socrates or Plato. He wanted to use Socrates' logical methods to figure out how the real world worked; Aristotle is really the father of today's scientific method. Aristotle led his students in research in every existing field of knowledge. They dissected animals and studied the habits of insects. The science of observation was new to the Greeks. Hampered by lack of instruments, they were not always correct in their conclusions.

Aristotle was especially interested in biology, in classifying plants and animals in a way that would make sense. When Alexander was traveling all over Western Asia, he had his messengers bring strange plants back to Aristotle for his studies. One of Aristotle's most important contributions was defining and classifying the various branches of knowledge. He sorted them into physics, metaphysics, psychology, rhetoric, poetics, and logic, and thus laid the foundation of most of the sciences of today.

Aristotle's Politics

Like Plato, Aristotle, wrote extensively on the subjects of tyranny and the rule of law. He hoped that his *Politics*, a collection of essays on government, would provide direction for rulers, statesmen, and politicians.

In *Politics*, Aristotle rejected Plato's ideal state. He said that it fails to address conflicts that will arise among its citizens. Unlike *The Republic*, *Politics* does not describe an ideal system of government. Instead, Aristotle explored practical constitutions that city-states can realistically put into effect.

He studied the different governments in Greece's many city-states. Aristotle stressed that laws must uphold just principles. Aristotle stated that "the rule of law . . . is preferable to that of any individual." This is because individuals possess flaws and could tailor government to their own individual interests, whereas the rule of law is objective. Rulers must be "the servants of the laws," because "law is order, and good law is good order."

In fact, one of Aristotle's true forms of government is a **polity**, a kind of constitutional democracy in which rich and poor respect each other's rights and the best-qualified citizens rule with the consent (agreement) of all. This type of state arises when the middle class is strong.

The U.S. Constitution

Like Plato and Aristotle, our nation's founders worried about tyrannical government. Recognizing that tyranny could come from a single powerful ruler or from "mob rule," the founders wrote into the Constitution mechanisms to prevent tyranny and promote the rule of law. They separated the powers of government into three equal branches of government: the executive (the president), the legislative (Congress), and the judicial (the Supreme Court). Each branch can check the other to prevent corruption or tyranny. Congress itself is divided into the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House, elected for two-year terms, is more likely to be swayed by the passions of the people than the Senate, elected to six-year terms. The Constitution further limits the powers of the government by listing its powers: The government may not exercise any power beyond those listed. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, protect people's liberties and freedoms. In creating the judicial branch of government, the framers gave federal judges lifetime terms, thus ensuring that judges would base their decisions on the law and be less likely to be swayed by politics.

Source - Adapted from: "**Socrates**." *Britannica School*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2013. Web.

"**Aristotle**." *Britannica School*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2013. Web.

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-26-1-plato-and-aristotle-on-tyranny-and-the-rule-of-law.html>

For Discussion

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) once said that "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms . . ." What did he mean? Do you agree? Explain.